

Echo

BASILDON

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**Dale Farm legal bill hits
£1.6m just for starters** P8-9



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BOSS ARRESTED IN £1.2M SHARE CON PROBE



Company director is held over



Legal battles' hefty costs – Dale Farm travellers speak to the media outside the Royal Courts of Justice in London

£1.6m so far and its rising fast

By JON AUSTIN
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THE legal battle over Dale Farm has cost taxpayers at least £1.6million since 2005, the Echo can reveal.

The true figure is likely to be significantly higher, but may never be known, as Basildon Council said it could not collate its costs for barristers at numerous public inquiries and enforcement action over the site between 2001 and 2004 when the problem began.

Since 2005, the council has spent at least £1.41million on court cases, bailiffs and other measures.

This does not include council officers' time.

A council spokesman said: "We only started collating specific costs from 2005. It would

Get on with it! It is costing far too much, says MP

not be possible to break down the costs before that."

The legal aid bill paid out by the Legal Services Commission for the travellers' legal battle, from the same year stands at £188,349.

Basildon and Billericay MP John Baron said: "Too much taxpayers' money has already been spent on travellers who have illegally developed this site.

"We must be one of the few countries in the world throwing public money at supporting individuals flouting the law.

"This site clearance should now proceed without further delay and cost to the public purse."

A Legal Services Commission spokesman said a civil action applicant has to meet standard financial means and legal merits tests to be granted legal aid.

This means they must be within the financial eligibility threshold for legal aid and their case must be regarded as having at least reasonable prospects of success in court.

The Government-funded Equalities and Human Rights Commission has also spent £67,000 on representing the families at the High Court since 2005.

Its costs are also rising as it has been sending representatives to the latest hearings.

Official to blame for press query leak

THE Department for Communities and Local Government has confirmed one of its officials passed information about an Echo press inquiry to a representative from Dale Farm.

A spokesman for the department, which has promised £1.2million towards Basildon Council's total eviction bill, said it had investigated how

Candy Sheridan and fellow Dale Farm supporter Stuart Hardwick Carruthers had been aware of our questions shortly after they were submitted.

The spokesman said a member of its gypsy and traveller unit who has built up relations with Mrs Sheridan had told her.

He added: "He was not instructed to, but we are satisfied this does not constitute a leak."

Meanwhile, the department has moved to distance itself from funding the eviction.

A spokesman said: "The department is going to make a payment of up to £1.2million for the clean up operation once the eviction is over. We are not paying for the eviction."

Government agency's land offer

A GOVERNMENT agency has offered land to council chiefs in a desperate bid to avoid the eviction.

The Homes and Communities Agency said it would also fund the development of alternative sites on council-owned land.

It is happy for its land at Gardiners Close, Basildon, Church Road, Laindon, Terminus Drive, Pitsea, and a fourth undisclosed site to be used as alternatives to Dale Farm.

Terry Fuller, the agency's executive director for the South East, wrote to Tony Ball: "The agency controls a number of sites in the borough and has funding which it can make available to establish pitches that meet the needs of traveller families.

"If the council has any land in its ownership, we would be pleased to consider funding the physical infrastructure on those sites also."

The letter also revealed the land investigated for use as possible relocation sites across the east of England until secret talks between the council, the agency and traveller representatives collapsed in October last year.

Mr Ball said: "Our position has not changed in that other authorities need to provide pitches.

"If most people left Dale Farm to other districts, we would strategically consider one small site within the borough."

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